

Economical Impacts of Modernization on the Tappers of Ahmad Tohari's *Bekisar Merah*

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Abstract: This literary research is primarily aimed at revealing the economical impacts of modernization on the tappers in Bekisar Merah. The study uses interdisciplinary approach, which involves economical, historical, cultural, ecological, and mimetic approaches. The analysis shows that the forms of modernization in Bekisar Merah are the impacts of the coming of electrification in the village. Modernization does not only cause positive impacts but also negative ones, which are stronger. The negative impacts include monopoly, human and cultural conflict, poverty, disharmony, greediness, law breaking, materialistic life, adultery, divorce, less religiosity, drop outs, and migration. The positive impacts include independence, adaptation, rationality, and efficiency. The problems appear in the novel reflects the inner conflict of the author, Ahmad Tohari. He questions the ideas of the coming of electricity set in Karangsoja village. Modernization can only be enjoyed by the upper class of the society. It cannot meet the necessity of the common people. The tappers loose some benefits because of the coming of electricity in their village. They cannot enjoy the electricity; moreover, it caused misery and poverty.

Keywords: *Modernization, electrification, economical life, and tappers.*

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MODERNIZATION is one of the developmental goals of a government. It is marked by a strong and conscious break with traditional forms and techniques of expression. It rejects traditional values and assumptions.¹ It is the coming of a new era of high aesthetic self-consciousness and non-representation toward style, technique, and spatial form in pursuit of a deeper penetration of life.² It is generally expected by most of the countries in the world especially the superior or high class.³ It can increase income or economic sector. It can also promote economical betterment for society. In addition, it can mean development, on the other hand, it can also mean conquest or even destruction.⁴ Modernization also causes social gap, disharmony, suffering or misery especially for the lower class of the society.⁵ Through *Bekisar Merah*, Ahmad Tohari questions the coming of modernization. The study focuses on the impacts of electrification on the tappers.

This study uses interdisciplinary approach. Besides, it also uses mimetic approach

that views the literary work as an imitation, or reflection, or counterfeiting, or as representation of the world and human life.⁶ Literary work is a reflection of human life of a society at a certain time and place. A literary work should be considered as a social phenomenon.⁷ Therefore, economical, historical, cultural, ecological, and sociological approaches are indispensable in this study.

Ahmad Tohari and his Works

Ahmad Tohari was born in Tinggarjaya, Jatilawang, Banyumas, Central Java on June 13, 1948. When he was 22, he married Siti Syamsiah, an elementary school teacher (1970). Most of his works deal with irreligious teaching. To him, literary work is one of the effective methods to teach moral teaching or to deliver history, law and philosophy. He uses literary works as a good method to preach.⁸ In 1981 he worked in Jakarta as the editor of daily news, *Merdeka* but he retreated for his children at the village. He has studied in various faculties, economics of Jen-

deral Sudirman University 74-75, politics 75-76 and school of medicine of YARSI in Jakarta '69-70. However, he decided not to continue all his studies. He went back to his village, Tinggarjaya to lead Islamic boarding school, NU Al-Falah. He has worked as a part-timer officer in BNI 1946, managing banking magazine. He managed editorial board of the magazine in 1986. In 1990 he followed the international writing program in America for three months. This experience stimulates him to be interested in writing some literary works. He is popular with his *Trilogi: Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* ('82), *Lintang Kemukus Dinihari* ('85), *Jantera Bianglala* ('86). He got award for his short story entitled *Jasa-jasa Buat Sanwirya* ('77), and for his novel-*Di Kaki Bukit Cibalak* ('79). His *Kubah* got reward as the best fiction reading in 1980. His *Jantera Bianglala* was the best fiction in 1968 and awarded Rp 1.000.000, from the minister of Education and Culture, Fuad Hassan. In 1994, *Bekisar Merah* reached the prize of ASEAN literature.

He started to write fictions since he was in the Senior High School, but he began to publish them after graduating from school. He was eager to write some stories when his first short stories were published in a daily news, *Kompas*. He was greatly motivated to write some other stories when his short story, *Jasa-jasa Buat Sanwirya* succeeded to win in the writing contest held by Nederland Radio. Since then, he got some other prizes. He is still active writing now. There are three factors to stimulate writing competence namely; habits, regular exercises, and much reading.⁹ His custom of living in the village influences his works. His local colors of works including *Bekisar Merah* depict the life of the village tappers. He spends his life in the countryside, therefore, he can depict exactly the experience of life in the village. Through *Bekisar Merah*, he depicts the life of villagers in Karang-soga. The name of Karang-soga village is an imaginative village. There is no such real name in the real place, Banyumas. Karang-soga is chosen to refer to a village where people tap

nira. The word Karangsoga derives from the word *karang* and *soga*, *karang* means a place to live or a place to gather; and rock. *Soga* means a tree in which the bark of the tree is used as the material to redden the sheet.¹⁰ Imaginatively, Karangsoga means a hilly and rocky place where people gather and work together to tap red sap. It is described as a poor, infertile, remote and isolated village contrasted to the metropolis life, Jakarta. He contrasts the culture of living in the village and town especially in welcoming the modernization. There are many negative impacts should be studied carefully before the program are really applied in society especially in the countryside. His other short stories are *Tanah Gantungan* (93), *Mata yang Enak Dipandang* (91), *Zaman Nalar Sungsang* (93), *Sekuntum Bunga Telah Gugur* (94), *Di Bawah Langit Dinihari* (93), *Pencuri* (85), *Orang-orang Sebelah Kali* (86), *Ah, Jakarta* (84), *Penipu yang Keempat* (91), *Warung Panajem* (94), *Kenthus* (85), *Rumah yang Terang* (85), *Daruan* (91), *Jembatan Ka* (85).

The Concept of Modernization

Modernization is intended by the government to have even distribution of development. It is not only related to something modern and social change, but also efficiency.¹¹ It is also a process which enables backward people of countries to escape from tradition, to promote and accelerate transition and to overcome underdevelopment.¹² Besides, it is up to date in a specific location at any given time.¹³ It is usually the result of a process of westernization, involving economical, political, social, and cultural changes which contrast with a previous traditional stability.

According to Levy in Harrison, modernization was defined as a continuum, according to the degree to which inanimate power and tools were developed. Levy distinguished between relatively modernized society and relatively non-modernized societies. The former to be high on specialization, universalism, centralization, rationality and functional specificity, possessing bureaucratic organization, a high-

ly generalized medium of exchange and developed markets. Relatively, non-modernized societies evidenced the very opposite of these characteristics. Modernization can also mean a total transformation of traditional society to modern society referring to the West.¹⁴

Jameelah shows that, the professed aim of western modernization is that the government intends to promote economic development, industrialization and mechanization to eliminate poverty, disease and illiteracy and to facilitate a higher standard of living for the people.¹⁵ This statement implies that, by having modernization, people can have a better economic development. It will create effectiveness and efficiency. Zulzani Hidayat stated that a farmer should not only work in the farm traditionally, but he should also use modern technology for example having irrigation, good fertilizer, good seed, and intensification program.¹⁶ However, sometimes, the introduction of technology faces opposition from the people who cannot enjoy it.¹⁷

Modernization is a global process. It does not relate with one place, one person, or one aspect, but it relates with all people universally. Consequently, it cannot accommodate all interests of all people. There are some people who can enjoy it very much. On the other hand, there are some people who cannot enjoy it. Moreover, there are some people who lost their sources of life. Jameelah restated that modernization is identical with Western civilization.¹⁸ The dominant idea of Western civilization is that mankind can achieve perfect happiness, health, prosperity, beauty, justice and lasting place through an intelligent, rational applicant of human reason unaided by any supernatural power. Nature is still viewed by scientists as an enemy to be conquered, dominated, exploited and manipulated to serve human ends.¹⁹ This statement reflects that Jameelah criticizes the people who have an idea that a better living can be acquired by conquering and exploiting nature. Mansyur stated that the actions of squatters will cause some problems, conflict between

the land owners and the squatters, between the squatters and the previous shelters, and it breaks rule of the balance of ecological life.²⁰ Modernization then is characterized by a high degree of literacy, urbanism, media participation and empathy.²¹ Further, Lerner showed that modernization is indicated by the presence of a distinct set of attitudes which includes: 1. a readiness for new experience and an openness to innovation, 2. an interest in things other than those of immediate relevance, 3. a more democratic attitude towards the opinion of others, 4. an orientation to the future rather than the past, 5. a readiness to plan one's own life, 6. a belief that we can dominate our environment and achieve our goals, 7. an acceptance that the world is calculable and therefore controllable, 8. an awareness of the dignity of others, for example, woman and children, 9. a faith in the achievement of science and technology, albeit a somewhat simple faith, and 10. a belief in distributive justice.²² These indications can be used to measure whether

or not the people are ready to welcome the coming of modernization.

The Impacts of Modernization on Economical Life in *Bekisar Merah*

There were some former researchers who discussed *Bekisar Merah*. Before being published by Gramedia, *Bekisar Merah* had been published by a daily news, Kompas. It has been analyzed by some critics. Maman S Mahayana²³ discussed it in *Horison* magazine with the title *Lingkungan Hidup dalam Bekisar Merah*. He explained generally about the struggle of village people, Karangsoga with the life style of common people. Intellectual people will be the center of dependence of village people. He only discusses one aspect of life, social problem. Alex Sudewo²⁴ in his paper entitle *Bekisar Merah oleh Ahmad Tohari, Tradisi yang Menggugat Pembangunan*, explains that development is made into a myth that it represents something dabble, so that the people are fidgety. Bakdi Soemanto²⁵ divided Karangsoga into two levels, *realite* and *su-*

realite. *Realite* level deals with basic necessities often faced by the people for example food, clothing, and housing, while *surrealite* level is beyond the *realite* level. *Surrealite* functions to stabilize or to neutralize the society. It unites Karang-soga people whenever there is a problem, or conflict. Getting torn of Karangsoga happened because of the unreadiness of Karangsoga people to welcome the coming of changes. As a result, it causes problem. The union of Karangsoga can be reached through three elements of ecology namely nature, economy, and the idea of the society. According to Haris, Lasi, as the main character is described as a faithful or loyal and special woman. However, inside of Lasi's specialty, she went directly as soon as she knew that her husband, Darsa is unfaithful. He makes affair with another woman.²⁶ Sudartomo Macaryus²⁷ focuses more on the aspect of characters and setting. At glance, Lasi can be the model of women, but at the same time she becomes the center of mockery from all her friends. Living in a town is different

from living in a village. Town is represented with something developed, busy, and independent. Village is represented with something underdeveloped, dirty, traditional, and isolated.

The coming of rural electrification brings about very extraordinary changes on the life of tappers in Karangsoga. There are very rapid influences of the effects of electrification on economical life of Karangsoga people especially the tappers.

Besides, electrification also influences on some other aspects of life such as family relationship, politic, education, culture, social activities, defense and security, law, religion, and ecological balances. Before the coming of electrification, Karangsoga people have possessed enough coconut palms to fulfill their daily need. Every family has at least twelve to forty coconut trees. Based on the research, the result of twelve coconut trees can be exchanged with three kilograms of rice. According to the main characters, Lasi and Darsa, three kilograms of rice can be used to fulfill their basic necessities. After the appearance of rural electrification program,

the strange workers of the government arrived in Karang-soga to cut all the coconut palms. *When the sun starts rising, the workers who want to cut the palm trees are coming. They are young men who appear in Karang-soga for the first time. They are indifferent; they are not willing to understand the pain of the tapper who will lose their palm trees. By chin saw, they start working mechanically, and conceitly.*²⁸ All the coconut palms growing under the electrical wires are cut down freely and carelessly. *Electrical wires spread along the street. There are some palm trees that should be cut down. Darsa only has twelve trees, and ten of them must be cut down.*²⁹ It reflects that, Darsa, one of the tappers in Karang-soga only still has two coconut trees. It means that, it is very ironical that, two coconut tress are enough to provide his family needs. Consequently, the income of the tappers decreases dramatically. They have no income anymore, because they have no trees to tapp with. Besides, the committee or the government workers cut the trees

freely without giving indemnity. *There are some tappers come to me, for their palm tress are cut down without getting indemnity.*³⁰

Electrification is the program of the government. It happened in the New Era when Suharto was a president. During his authority, he programmed rural electrification. The government actually has good goal in setting electricity. However, the villagers especially the tappers reject it because it really causes misery for them. They do not need electricity at that time. What they need is food. They cannot live without food but they can live without electricity.

The result of this coconut tree cutting is that, Darsa really loses his main source of income. ... *he will really lose his main source of life.*³¹ This tapping is the only work he can do, he has no other skills or activities to make money. Besides, the natural soil is not fertile enough to plant other kinds of plantation such as rice, and some other vegetables or fruits. The geographical area is sloping and hilly land. Consequently, no water can

reach the land except on the rainy season. *Some trees grow on the slope densely and closely; sengon tree, sugar palm, jengkol, dadap, and areca nut tree.*³² *Karangsoga is in the slope of volcanic mountain. The people like tapping because the coconut crops is very little, the trees are high, less sun light, the trees are too closed, and there are some squirrels eating the coconut that are difficult to combat.*³³ Traditional people like karangsoga tappers believe that living poorly and naturally is fate. They think that God has predestined their life as they experienced. They never protest against the fate or nature. *People who give in to someone else, they will be appreciated lately.*³⁴ When they have no money or other business, they never borrow money from other people, even less from *pak Tir*. *Karangsoga is always calm and quiet, as if poverty of the tappers is accepted as the fate.*³⁵ *God has ruled everything, human being is only undergoing.*³⁶

Karangsoga tappers do not frustrate to face the difficulties of life. After the pro-

gram of electrification, they have no tress for tapping, and consequently they have to borrow money from other people to continue their life. In that situation, there is only one person who possibly can lend the money, namely *Pak Tir*. Everyone who wants to borrow the money from him, as a return, he must sell the sugar to him. Besides, people cannot borrow the money as much as they want. This action lately leads to the existence of monopoly. In Karangsoga only *pak Tir* who does not mind receiving the electricity. He just collects the palm sugar from the tappers, and sells them to the other bigger collectors with higher price.

Lasi is one of the people who borrows money from *pak Tir*. She lends money for paying the hospital fee of her husband, Darsa. However, the loan money is not enough to pay the hospital. The economical condition of Lasi is worse when Darsa is hospitalized because of falling down unexpectedly from the top of the palm tree. The couple has no money anymore for the hospital fee. There is no other way

they can do except borrowing money from *pak Tir*. *Pak Tir* is the collector of *nira* in that village who hires out coconut trees. *From the answer of the nurse, Lasi can calculate the loan money from pak Tir that is only enough for ten days.*³⁷ This quotation reflects her helplessness. Lasi's bravery to borrow money from *pak Tir*, represents that she is rational. It means that she is optimistic and still has a hope that Darsa can recover from his sickness, even though whether or not she can pay back the debt. At least, Lasi has endeavored to protect his family. Since that time Lasi tried hard to be optimistic and independent woman. This is the positive indirect impact of modernization for her.

Economically, the collector or the buyer should follow the price determined by the owner of the sugar. However, in this story the tappers or farmers have no power anymore to determine the price because they have debt from *pak Tir*. It is a kind of problematic situation that, when the tappers do not borrow money from *pak Tir*, they cannot ful-

fill their necessities. On the other hand, if they borrow money from him, consequently, they should sell the sugar to him with very low price. There is no other choice for the tappers except following the rule of *pak Tir*. Finally, the worst situation will be on the tappers, because they will get a little profit, and they should return the debt. This condition matches with the theory of modernization that, the bad impacts of modernization are mainly on the common people. Lasi should rent some coconut tress from *pak Tir* in order to fulfill her daily life. Lasi has to do this because, her husband cannot do something else except tapping. The consequence of this is that, Lasi should sell the palm sugar to *pak Tir*, and she is not brave enough to sell it to the other collector. *If Lasi borrows money from pak Tir, she cannot sell the sugar to the other collector anymore and the price must be low.*³⁸ However, this action will train Lasi to be independent woman. The way the tappers sell the palm sugar is also indirectly influenced by the emergence of electrifica-

tion. When the tappers still have their own coconut palms, and they have no rent from *pak Tir*, they are free to sell their palm sugar to every collector who offers the highest prices. The condition after having no palm sugar is totally different. They are not brave enough to sell their palm sugar to other *person*, because they have rent from him. Here, the tappers have no bargaining power to determine the price. It is only *pak Tir* who always determines the price that should be followed by the tappers. Moreover, the price determined by *pak Tir* is always lower than the price of some other collectors. *It is impossible for the tappers to reject the price from pak Tir, and it is impossible to bring the sugar home because most of them are indebted to him.*³⁹ This quotation reflects how weak the tappers are against the collector. *Pak Tir* is successful in creating the condition that the tappers are dependent. It is called monopoly. Here, *pak Tir* has a monopoly on palm sugar, so that the sugar belongs to him, and no one else can share it.

Stealing wood or trees in the forest is another example of the impact of electrification. While the tappers still have all the coconut trees, they work hard and they are busy with their own tapping. As soon as their coconut trees are cut, they stop tapping. *They have no initiative to find other source of life and they have no bravery to criticize the free market that determines the sugar price.*⁴⁰ Consequently, they have no other activities, and they cannot work except tapping. One of their ways to continue their life is stealing trees from the forest to sell. The risk of stealing trees from the forest causes a worse effect to the economical condition of the tapper. The risk is that, the stealers are possibly caught and imprisoned. When they are imprisoned, they cannot fulfill their daily needs. Lately they cannot take care of their children and their family. The following quotation shows this condition. *Cemeng's father should stay in the prison for five months because he was found bringing the branches of palm trees for firewood from the side of the forest. The*

*branches are actually the rests of stolen woods of the thief that has been permitted by the safeguard.*⁴¹ *If the sugar price falls, it is impossible for the tappers to cook nira unless they steal the trees from the forest or cut any kinds of tress they have.*⁴² Stealing woods to sell is the alternative way to continue their life, because it is only the activity that they can do. *I also want to sell firewood, Darsa said. If the fate predestinates me so (being caught and imprisoned) what can I do? What I can do is actually depends on the forests result.*⁴³ The coming of electrification causes poverty and misery of the tappers. They are not ready yet to welcome the existence of electrification. What the government provides does not meet with what the tappers want. The primary necessity of the tappers is food, not electricity. This disagreement causes bad impact. After the existence of electrification, they should pay the taxes of electricity, they should set or take it, and they have to pay the bill or charge, while they do not understand and do not allocate cost for it be-

fore. Before electrification, they lived and worked naturally, they did not spend too much money for electricity, and they did not pay taxes and some other charges. In daily life, they use kerosene for the daily light. *Lasi realizes that what she should do is lighting the lamp on the house pole.*⁴⁴ It is impossible for the tappers including Darsa to take or set the electricity, because it causes them misery. *Darsa him self who has sacrificed his source of life for the electrical wire, it is impossible to take the electricity.*⁴⁵ Prisoner is another example of the impact of electrification. Some tappers of Karangsoaga are imprisoned because they take the branches of fallen trees in the forest. As long as they still have coconut tress, they tapp their own trees; while they have no coconut tress, they have no other job anymore. Darsa is the example of the tapper who plans to choose stealing wood from the forest to sell. He commits such action because he has no other activities except tapping, while he has no coconut tress anymore. He does not feel afraid whenever he is caught by the

forest guard and imprisoned. The more people who have no coconut trees, the more people who want to steal the trees from the forest. Consequently, the imprisoned father cannot take care of the family anymore because he should stay in the prison. Before the coming of electrification, the tappers sell their palm sugar as a result of production. They think that, they still get profit from this production because they can get the firewood freely. According to Kan jat's research, the tappers are required to sell the *nira* instead of the palm sugar. They do not sell the palm sugar. Kanjat proposes a very big machine to co-ok *nira* together. Kanjat suggests the tappers to sell the *nira* and cook them together with this very big stove. The tappers reject it, because they think that, economically the price of *nira* is cheaper than the price of palm sugar. *The tappers are not willing to sell the nira because it is something new for them. It is still difficult for them to accept changes. Besides, their income will decrease even though*

*they have spare time to do other activities.*⁴⁶

Conclusion

The form of modernization in *Bekisar Merah* is the introduction of electrification. It brings about great changes in the society especially the tappers of Karangsoaga. The changes can include all aspects of life, but they primarily shape economical aspects of traditional people, the tappers. It shapes the behavior of the tappers in the society. Electrification in *Bekisar Merah* does not only cause positive impacts, but also negative ones, which are stronger. The negative impacts include human and cultural conflict, imbalanced ecology, poverty, disharmony, greediness. The positive impacts include adaptation, the introduction of new technology, and efficiency. The problems in the novel reflect the inner conflict of the author, Ahmat Tohari. He questions the ideas of the coming of the electrification on the traditional tappers. Ideally, the coming of modernization should maximize the positive impacts and minimize the negative ones.

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